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USES

OF

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

A REPORT TO THE
MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF THE NEW JERUSALEM.

BY

WARREN GODDARD, JR.

PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE ASSOCIATION,
BY THE
MASSACHUSETTS NEW CHURCH UNION,
169 TREMONT STREET, BOSTON, MASS.
1880.

(20579)

SEP 20 1890

USES OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

THOSE who are trying to live good lives, but who are unconnected with any religious society, often ask themselves and others the question, "What good will it do me to join the Church?" The young and the old make this inquiry. They have no objection to urge against the truths of the Church; their difficulty is that they do not see precisely how joining an outward organization is going to help them. As long as they are unable to understand the uses of Church membership, they dread making any outward profession, for fear that they shall fall short of the standard they have chosen, or lapse into hypocrisy. Such feelings are to be respected, because they are right. Nothing should be undertaken without consulting its use. Least of all, should the important step of associating one'sself with a body of the Church be taken, without understanding something of the spiritual advantages of so doing. They who enroll themselves on the list of church members merely because their pastor, church committee, parents, or friends, desire them to do so; or, merely because others of about the same age and experience are coming into the Church, will derive little benefit from such a step. The individual mind must be open to the understanding of the truth, and the individual heart must actively respond to the good of mutual association, or else the connection will be formal and of little avail.

We shall be sure of the steps we take if we approach this subject in a simple way. We know that it is good and useful to be associated together for the performance of natural uses. The evil-intentioned, the robber and murderer, shun society, except when they come to it to plunder and destroy. The well-disposed live in communities and accomplish their successes in the midst of association with others. Experience teaches that railroads, public works, large manufacturing interests, are better managed by several rather than by single individuals. "Two heads are wiser than one," as the saying is. Charity is more wisely dispensed by Boards of Charity, or Overseers of the Poor, than by the individual. Literary culture is better imparted by the university or college, than by the isolated teacher. We might multiply examples showing the good attained by association, but it is needless. The reasons for the good results thus obtained are obvious. Many minds acting together make a more powerful mind, many hearts beating as one afford larger motive power. This law seems to be written on the universe itself. Almost all the animals, excepting those living upon flesh, go in herds; almost all the birds, excepting the flesh-eating, live in flocks. The trees grow in clumps or forests. This instinct and inclination are from spiritual influx. The universe is one: the Divine Being made it one. Being thus made, one part must necessarily seek for union with the other parts, establishing the closest union with those nearest like itself.

The habits of the good animal and tree reflect the order of heaven. If they, almost without exception, live and act

in communities, if they are strongest and happiest when united, why should not man be?

But we are not left to learn the necessity of association, by inference from the rest of creation, strong and conclusive as this inference is. Man, while he can more closely conjoin himself with his fellow beings than bird or beast, and while he has the power, also, to make this union spiritual and eternal, which power the beasts do not have, can be immensely more selfish than they, and can withdraw himself a greater distance from other beings. The Lord knows the coldness and selfishness of our natures, so He teaches us in His Word the same lesson He has taught in nature. The use and desirableness of association could not be more emphasized than it is in PSALM cxxxiii.: "*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments. As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion; for there Jehovah commanded the blessing, life forever more.*" "*Where two or three are gathered together,*" he says in the New Testament, "*there am I in the midst of them.*" He chose not one, but twelve disciples to represent Him. He sent forth the disciples two by two to evangelize the world. He was not a recluse, but lived among men. In his prayer for those who follow Him, He says, "*I pray not that they should be taken out of the world, but that they be kept from the evil.*" He always loved men; but that love was more full after He had assumed the humanity, and lived as

a man, among men, on earth. His presence is promised to "*two or three gathered together in His name*" — not that He will not come to man when alone, but that more of His presence will be felt when man is united with other men. He loves many more than one; hence, if we are conjoined to the many, we are united closer to Him — we have more of His spirit, we are more fully in His image and likeness.

From the Bible we learn that it is a good thing to be united as brethren. The purpose of being united as brethren is to learn to do the things that the Bible teaches; for this makes us brethren — children of the same Heavenly Father, members of the same spiritual family. He wants us to be in His image and likeness; He loves all men. We must love all men to be His children; to love them we must understand them, to understand them we must be associated with them. The same love which leads us to separate ourselves from others, separates us from the Lord.

The Church is instituted for the sake of helping men into heaven: it is, or is intended to be, a little heaven on earth. It accomplishes its end by assisting us to understand and do the truth taught in the Bible. We have a just and adequate motive in joining the Church when we unite with it for the sake of this spiritual life. The tacit and blind acknowledgment of the fact that the Church advances spiritual life is not sufficient for our purpose. We want to see, rationally, how the Church helps us. Union with others helps us overcome our selfishness in its various forms; and it is selfishness that we most need to overcome. If we live alone and work alone, we are very likely to feel our own importance.

The Church brings us in close communion with others as important, if not more important than we are. We recognize, if we are well-disposed, that we must do justice to them, and acknowledge their rights. This involves a humbling of self. The process helps rid us of our petty notions, our weaknesses and evils, and, accordingly, renders us more useful to the world.

Those who go to heaven, first learn how to work with others. One of the great uses of Church membership is to teach us this lesson, which is sometimes so hard to learn. We can learn it a great deal easier inside than we can outside of Church organizations. Spirits, in the world of spirits, are trained in choirs, so that they can act in unity; and this before they are elevated into heavenly societies. This process does not sink the individuality; it elevates it: it merely separates it from all that is foolish and unreasonable, and positively wrong; thus from all that is inharmonious with the common good. What does not harmonize with this good and disregards it, does not come from the Lord, consequently it has not true individuality. The natural way of working is to work all alone, and get the credit for working; the heavenly way of working is to work for and with others, claiming no merit for ourselves.

The fear that we must give up our freedom to join a society of the Church, springs from the natural love of working in our own way. Freedom is of two kinds, one is real, the other apparent. True freedom comes from the truth. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." "*Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.*"

If we join the Church for the help it can give us in living a good life, we renounce something of false freedom, which is, essentially, slavery to sin; but we gain in real freedom, because we learn from the many, new forms of truth, and acquire from them new affection for it. These qualities free us from the enslaving power of our evils. Whatever we lose in spiritual association with others is always our gain: we lose only that which cannot be taken to heaven, we are deprived only of that which comes from hell.

The fear that the individual is not good enough deters some from uniting with the Church. The Church is not an association of masters and lords, but of servants and disciples. It is composed of those who are trying to be good, not of those who are already good; for "none is good, save one, God." No man is so good that he does not need association with others; the better he is, the more he craves this association. The recognition of one's own sinful tendencies, and the earnest desire to overcome them, are sufficient motives for uniting with the Church, where such help is afforded. He has some good who "*hungers and thirsts after righteousness; and he shall be filled*,"—the Lord and His Church are glad to nourish such desires.

We feel an increased sense of responsibility on joining the Church. It is good for us to feel responsibility. We feel it in proportion as we are in good. The evil feel little, if any, responsibility, although they often take great responsibilities upon themselves. We may shrink from assuming the responsibility of joining the Church: we in reality assume a greater responsibility by remaining out of it, if we

love its truth. To associate with others is the orderly way to heaven; to go alone is disorderly. To assume that we can go without the help of association is assuming large responsibility. The fact that the person who thus separates himself does not realize his responsibility so much as he does when he meditates uniting with others, is on account of his own blindness. The responsibility is there all the same. The fact that he does see his responsibility more clearly from association with others in spiritual uses is proof of the good that such association does him. The deeper our sense of responsibility, the deeper our life. Life would be tame without responsibility, utterly profane without regard to the sacred trusts imposed upon us. Responsibility is a spur and incentive, throwing enough of seriousness into life to preserve it from sacrilege. The fact that the Church increases our sense of responsibility shows that it gives us freedom; for the two qualities are one.

If we are identified with some society of the Church, we are led to recognize the good in that society, thence in the commonwealth and in the nation. We are less exposed to harsh criticism of our fellow-men. A member of a family is not so likely to indulge in morbid criticism of the rest of the family, as one is who only visits the family, but who is not identified with it. Close union with others in moral, political, and spiritual uses helps us to be as charitable to them as we are to ourselves, to be as hopeful of the Church, of the State and nation, as we learn to be in the slow process of our own regeneration. Spiritual association is, therefore, useful in the removal of the prevalent habit of complaining.

We are each destined for some angelic society: that we shall reach that society is the Divine desire. If we let the Lord lead us, we shall be brought into one of these mansions prepared for us by our Father. The ultimate, the earthly counterpart of the spiritual society, is the Church society. When we are fully and usefully connected with an earthly society for the advancement of the Lord's kingdom on earth, we are more fully conjoined with the heavenly society. We are doing things here that must be done before we can be happy in heaven. How much better that we should begin early to put away our idiosyncrasies and follies, our narrownesses and evils, rather than that they should be more deeply rooted by procrastination.

We have suggested some things which may help to answer the question, "What good will it do me to join the Church?" We would suggest the usefulness of asking another question, namely, "What good can I do to others by joining the Church?" To inquire what good we shall, ourselves, obtain from a society of the Church is naturally the first question, because we are, naturally, most interested in our own good. After having satisfied ourselves in this direction, we should take a broader, more unselfish view of the situation.

Every new, open acknowledgment of the truth, if it is sincere, is a new embodiment of truth, and therefore a new power of truth. The more fully this acknowledgment is made, the more powerful it is. It is thereafter easier for others to acknowledge it, not only with the lips, but in the life. It is written: "I will declare what He hath done for

my soul." There is a use in uttering the internal convictions of right. It strengthens them in ourselves and in others; it clothes them with bodies, it perfects them by giving them a natural form.

Spirits coming from earth are welcomed in the spiritual world as new food for the body. Every worthy accession to a society feeds that society and its individual members. They feel the effects of the internal victories that the new member has undergone on account of the truth he loves. They feel the power therein gained; they welcome him to the uses which he is fitted to perform among them, and which no one of their present number is so well able to perform, and this encourages them to a better doing of their own special uses. His accession makes that society a more perfect man, and thus each one of its members a more perfect man. When he goes out into the world, he carries the sphere of the earthly society of the Church with him. It strengthens him in the hour of temptation, it opens his understanding and heart, and helps him do his daily work among men.

The outward act of confessing the Lord, and the desire to do His commandments, spiritually locate the individual; others feel freer to approach him; he feels freer to draw nearer to those who want to love the truth with him. Thus he is helped into the use he can best perform. Nothing is so full of blessing as that which brings us to those we can spiritually help. The Church invites us to join her that she may help us to do this good.

Joining the Church is a duty to the Lord and the neigh-

bor. It is a means whereby we may "honor father and mother." But this duty is forced upon no one. We are called "friends," and to the "friend" it is given to "know what his Lord doeth." To those who can freely and intelligently see this duty, it is a happy way of honoring their Heavenly Father and spiritual mother. The Lord is our Father, the Church, our spiritual mother; it helps us to "honor" these spiritual parents, to place ourselves more fully under their direction and influence. The nearer we come to them, the more we can love them and do for them, thus the more can we "honor" them.

(Mar., 1890, 20,000)

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